

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 764

By Henry

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of the Honorable John Shelton Wilder, Sr., former Lieutenant Governor of the State of Tennessee.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of John Shelton Wilder, Sr., of Somerville, whose lifetime of distinguished public service improved the quality of life for every Tennessean. In his passing, Tennessee has lost one of her finest statesmen, and a gentleman of courage and high character, dedicated to his State and Nation; and

WHEREAS, a native son of Tennessee, born and raised in Fayette County, John S. Wilder was successful in his every endeavor – in business as a merchant and banker, in the legal profession as a prominent attorney, in the field of agriculture as a dedicated farm owner and cotton gin operator, as a pilot with advanced ratings, and as a public servant with a towering record of accomplishment that will never be equaled; and

WHEREAS, a graduate of the University of Tennessee College of Agriculture and the University of Memphis School of Law, John S. Wilder was long involved in the management of the Longtown Supply Company, a family firm founded in 1887; and

WHEREAS, a lifelong advocate for equality for all, John Wilder was a skilled negotiator and peacemaker, as exhibited by the instrumental role he played in the resolution of the Tent City civil rights struggle in 1960, as he stood firm and came to the aid of African-American tenant farmers who had been evicted from their homes because they sought to vote; and

WHEREAS, John S. Wilder began his political career at the local level as the Secretary-Treasurer of the Board of Supervisors of the Fayette County Soil Conservation District, which he helped organize and later served as Chair; he also served eighteen years on the Fayette County Quarterly Court; and

WHEREAS, offering himself for service in Nashville, John S. Wilder won election to the legislature in November, 1958, when the good people of Senate District 26, currently composed of Chester, Crockett, Fayette, Hardeman, Hardin, Haywood, McNairy, and Wayne counties, evinced their great faith in the political and governmental capabilities of the young man from Longtown by electing him as their State Senator; and

WHEREAS, serving forty-four years overall in the Senate, John S. Wilder provided stalwart and innovative leadership as Lieutenant Governor and Speaker of the Senate for eighteen consecutive terms and thirty-six years, and set the record for the longest continuous service by the elected presiding officer of any legislative body in the free world; and

WHEREAS, during his illustrious tenure in the Senate, John S. Wilder was not only a faithful servant of his district, he also demonstrated the vision and fortitude necessary to move Tennessee forward as a state; and

WHEREAS, among his many storied accomplishments, enactment of the Tennessee Plan for the election of state judges and the comprehensive overhaul of the State Board of Education to advance K-12 public education are considered by many to be two of the most significant, impacting the lives of every Tennessean; and

WHEREAS, no less significant was his leadership in the development of an independent legislature through the employment of professional staff and support services for members, the construction of Legislative Plaza to provide hearing rooms and office space, and his firm belief that the "Senate shall be the Senate"; and

WHEREAS, on Capitol Hill, John S. Wilder worked with purpose and conviction to assist his fellow farmers and the agricultural community as a whole by establishing the Agricultural Resources Conservation Fund, which utilizes a small portion of realty transfer taxes to generate six million dollars per year to conserve soil and water resources in all ninety-five Tennessee counties; and

WHEREAS, Governor Wilder generously donated his time and energies to many community and charitable organizations; he was a Mason, a Shriner, and a member of the Scottish Rite; and

WHEREAS, a highly successful attorney, John Wilder was a member of Delta Theta Phi Legal Fraternity, the Tennessee Judicial Council, and the Tennessee Bar Association; and

WHEREAS, John S. Wilder served with distinction as President of both the Tennessee Association of Soil Conservation Districts and the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts, and during his national presidency, he achieved the incredible feat of knowing all 3,000 conservation supervisors by their first names; and

WHEREAS, this noble son of the soil was engaged in farming and cotton ginning his whole life and was deservedly inducted into the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts Southeastern Region Hall of Fame in 2006; and

WHEREAS, an avid aviator for fifty years who held advanced ratings as a pilot, Governor Wilder flew his beloved "Jaybird" when traveling to the State Capitol for legislative sessions and was most appropriately inducted into the Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame in 2005; and

WHEREAS, in 2006, the prestigious National Conference of State Legislatures presented John S. Wilder a special Leadership Award in recognition of his exemplary tenure as Speaker of the Senate; and

WHEREAS, lauded for his dedication to bipartisanship, Governor Wilder initiated the establishment of the John S. Wilder Public Service Institute at Lambuth University to teach students pursuing degrees in political science to be statesmen in a non-partisan manner; and

WHEREAS, Governor Wilder was no stranger to awards and accolades during his distinguished career in public service; the Tennessee Youth Development Center in Fayette County was named in his honor in 1975, the John S. Wilder Community Center is located in Grand Junction, Tennessee, and the John S. Wilder Tower was dedicated at the University of Memphis in 2003. In 2007, a bronze bust of Governor Wilder was dedicated in that same tower and another bronze bust of him, funded by Friends of Wilder, was installed in the Fayette County Courthouse; and

WHEREAS, most recently, the 2007-2008 Tennessee Blue Book was dedicated to John S. Wilder, stating on the dedication page that: "His legacy of fairness, honesty and compassion will continue to enhance the lives of his fellow Tennesseans for many years"; and

WHEREAS, a faithful member of Braden Methodist Church for more than fifty years, John Shelton Wilder was a loving husband, father and grandfather, and a warm and true friend, who never lost the common touch and whose life was an example of Christian stewardship; and

WHEREAS, preceded in death by his beloved wife Marcelle Morton Wilder, Governor Wilder is survived by his sons and daughters-in-law, David and Patti Wilder and Shelton and Judy Wilder; his grandchildren, Jarod Wilder, Whitney Wilder, John Wilder III, and Joseph Wilder and his wife, Heather; and his great grandchildren, Suzie, Jess, Russell, Ansel, and Marcelle Wilder; and

WHEREAS, Governor Wilder had deep admiration for those who worked for the greater good for all citizens. When giving his highest praise of an individual he often stated that "He was good. He made a difference." John Shelton Wilder, Sr., was good and he made a difference for the State of Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, John Shelton Wilder leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, a true beloved son of Tennessee who took great pride in making his community and State a better place for all, it is fitting that this General Assembly should pause to remember the extraordinary life of Lt. Governor John S. Wilder; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of Lt. Governor John Shelton Wilder, Sr., reflecting fondly upon his resolute character, his unrivaled years of admirable service to the people of Tennessee, and his stalwart commitment to living the examined life with courage and conviction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to the family of Governor Wilder.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation to the family of Governor Wilder, with this final clause omitted from such copy.